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Dayan YY Lichtenstein isn't afraid of a fight, especially when he's standing up for what's right

BY *Judy Silkoff*
PHOTOS *Mendel Photography*



The

prominent London businessman was unimpressed. Dayan Yisroel Yaakov Lichtenstein, the new *rosh beis din* of the Federation of Synagogues, one of the United Kingdom's four Orthodox synagogue bodies, had approached him about a *shidduch* between the man's son, a budding *talmid chacham*, and the daughter of a *rosh yeshivah*. But the businessman wasn't interested in the match. "I don't want my son to become a *rosh yeshivah*," he said.

Recalling this story some 26 years later, Dayan Lichtenstein smiles ruefully. "I told him I was personally insulted by his intransigence," he says. "After all, by insisting that becoming a *rosh yeshivah* was not a worthy pursuit for his child, what was he saying about my career choice?"

Fast-forward to 2015, and things are quite different. Today, *askanim* and successful business owners encourage their sons to advance in learning and marry the daughters of *klei kodesh*; Torah is at the top of their list of priorities.

"Put simply, Dayan Lichtenstein has played a revolutionary role in the London *kehillah*," says Rabbi Eliezer Lieber Schneebalg *shlita, rav* of the Machzikei Hadass shul in Edgware, who has worked closely with the *dayan* over the years. "In the *beis din*, Dayan Lichtenstein made changes that gave the man on the street confidence in *dinei Torah* and steered them away from taking cases to the secular courts."

Rosh beis din of the Federation, Dayan Lichtenstein is the spiritual head of the organization's 14 constituent and seven affiliated shuls, which range from chareidi establishments located in the heart of Golders Green, to architecturally grand synagogues that now have only a handful of aging members. He gives regular *shiurim* to the Federation's *rabbanim*, taking their *sh'eilos* and advising them on the practical and pastoral challenges that come their way.

Rabbi Dovid Tugendhaft is the young *rav* of one of the Federation's newest member shuls, the Nishmas Yisrael *kehillah* in Hendon. Comprised of 130 member families, largely yeshivah graduates and young professionals, the community is thriving. Rabbi Tugendhaft finds the support provided by Dayan Lichtenstein invaluable.

"I've come to realize that in this day and age, when people ask *sh'eilos* they expect answers straightaway and are far more likely to abide by the response if they



do get it immediately," Rabbi Tugendhaft says. "The fact that Dayan Lichtenstein is available to the *rabbanim* and members of the *kehillah*, even at unsociable hours, is something that can't be underestimated."

Only What's Right While Dayan Lichtenstein is well liked around the community, he has also staked out a reputation for taking a stand when necessary.

London *askan* Mr. Aaron Schwebel's close association with Dayan Lichtenstein began ten years ago, after he became embroiled in a traumatic libel case involving a young *frum* married woman who was slandered publicly by a wealthy community member. After attempting to help the woman extricate herself from the situation, the man took the Dayan to court, culminating in the longest-running slander trial in British legal history.

"It was the Sassover Rebbe *ztz"l* who first asked me to step in and help the Dayan with this case," explains Mr. Schwebel. "Until I and others got involved to assist with finding funding for the case and helping him deal with the lawyers, he was holding his own against a multimillionaire determined to break him. But he wasn't going to be swayed."

For the duration of the marathon, 11-week trial, private investigators turned over every aspect of Dayan Lichtenstein's personal life trying to unearth scandal; his phones were tapped and the British press had a field day. Wary of the glaring spotlight that had been turned onto the Jewish community, prominent *rabbanim* urged the Dayan to apologize to the man so he would drop the case, but on the advice of *gedolim* and with the help of *askanim* like Mr. Schwebel, Dayan Lichtenstein stood fast.

"This woman had done nothing untoward and her reputation was at stake," the Dayan recalls. "I knew very well that I might not win the case, but I felt I had to do what was right."

This is the essence of Dayan Lichtenstein, Aaron Schwebel says. "He might sometimes come across as immutable and occasionally his stand has needed to be aggressive, but he cares only about halachah and doing what is right. And that's why the Federation Beis Din

is constantly inundated with cases — people trust him.”

Time to Give Back Dayan Yisroel Yaakov Lichtenstein was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in March 1954. His father, Rabbi Kalman Lichtenstein, was born in Bialystok, and served during wartime as *rav* in Rasein, Poland. After the onset of World War II he escaped to Shanghai with the Mirrer yeshivah, making his way to the United States at the end of the war. Reb Kalman was a *talmid* of Rav Boruch Ber Leibowitz *ztz”l*, the Kamenitzer *rosh yeshivah*. Dayan Lichtenstein’s mother, Rebbetzin Golda *a”h*, was herself a niece of Rav Boruch Ber and her father was the Kamenitzer *meshgiach* Rabbi Naftoli Leibowitz, a *talmid* of the Alter of Slobodka.

Reb Kalman and Rebbetzin Golda married in 1948, with Reb Kalman briefly taking up the position of head of the Kamenitzer *kollel* in New York before moving to Boston. There, he was appointed *rav* of the Walnut Street Shul (succeeding Rabbi Avigdor Miller *ztz”l*) and director of the Chelsea Hebrew Day School. Subsequently, he was also appointed *rosh mesivta* of a local high school.

“My father *ztz”l* was a *litvishe talmid chacham*,” explains Dayan Lichtenstein, “but despite the fact that he was not American-born, he had a knack for connecting with people.”

“I just had to ignore the cynics and get on with things.” Dayan Lichtenstein remade the Federation’s *kavod*

By all accounts, Reb Kalman was especially proficient in the application of practical halachah. Dayan Lichtenstein, too, felt drawn toward this field, nurturing his interest even while devoting himself to learning *b’iyun*. He was a *talmid* first in Boston, then in New York, followed by Brisk in Eretz Yisrael, returning to the US to learn in Lakewood and finally the Mir.

In 1978, Dayan Lichtenstein married Rena Kagan, daughter of Miriam and Meyer Getzel Kagan (also a former Mirrer *talmid*) of Chicago. After their marriage, the young couple returned to Eretz Yisrael and Rav Lichtenstein fully immersed himself in the study of halachah, studying for seven years under Rav Moshe Halberstam *ztz”l*, a *dayan* on the Eidah Hachareidis.

Eventually, he felt the urge to give back to the *klal*, so that when he was approached in

1987 regarding the position of *rosh beis din*, he understood that his time had come.

“Before agreeing, I asked for advice from my *rebbeim* and mentors,” he recalls. “I approached Dayan Weiss *ztz”l* [the Minchas Yitzchak], and Dayan Grossnass *ztz”l* [the Lev Aryeh], both of whom strongly encouraged me to go.”

Remaking the Federation In 1987, the Federation of Synagogues was marking its centenary but was already a very different organization from the one that had been established toward the end of the 19th century. Inaugurated in 1887 by philanthropist Lord Samuel Montagu, one of only three *shomer Shabbos* members of Parliament in all of British history, the Federation was set up to meet the needs of impoverished Jews streaming into London to escape anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Very different from

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the established Anglicized Jew, these newcomers clung to their *minhagim*, spoke only Yiddish, and often could not even afford to bury their children; infant mortality rates at the time were soaring and the existing synagogue bodies’ fees were high. Little *shtieblach* and “*chevras*” had popped up all over the East End of London where the immigrants could daven, but the community was woefully underserved.

Lord Montagu alleviated many of these problems by grouping the *shtiebels* together under his umbrella organization, his “Federation.” He encouraged the new member shuls to keep their independence, while at the same time offering them access to centrally controlled — and crucially, more affordable — burial and kashrus services. The Federation was a trailblazer for Orthodoxy in the United Kingdom from the turn of the 20th century, growing in membership to include 35,000 families and 70 shuls in the East End of London alone.

World War II wrought many changes to the landscape of the Jewish community, however; the East End was hit hard in the Blitz and during the 1950s and residents began slowly leaving the area, migrating to the West and North of the city. The Federation began to struggle to define its niche; as time went on, the communities centered around its original synagogues shrank and shuls were forced to merge together to survive — some disappeared entirely.

The more religiously committed members moved on to newer, burgeoning communities and those remaining viewed the once-thriving *shtieblach* as places to visit a few times a year. As the Anglo-Jewish community became more

polarized in general, the Federation often found itself caught in the middle. To the left was the UK’s mainstream Orthodox body, which began clamoring for a merger with it in the early 1960s, and to the right was a rapidly expanding chareidi organization that didn’t see the need for more than one Torah-true representative body in the relatively small community.

New Relevance But the Federation had always seen itself as a powerhouse of true Yiddishkeit in the United Kingdom and Dayan Lichtenstein was keen to re-establish its relevance. The opportunity wasn’t long in arriving. In the late 1980s the British government proposed changes to the way *shechitah* was carried out in the country, but the Dayan’s concerns regarding the halachic permissibility of the recommendations were not shared by the mainstream establishment. It was only when the Federation and the right-wing body joined forces that they were able to prevail.

“I realized I simply had to ignore the cynics as much as possible and just get on with things,” he says. “I had to stay true to who I was and to my goal, while upholding the *rabbanus* and the *kavod* of the organization.”

Government issues aside, it was perhaps Dayan Lichtenstein’s very first day on the job at the Federation that left him most nonplussed. Recalling the first *sh’eilah* brought before his *beis din*, some trace of the nerves he must have experienced at the time are still palpable.

“I was presented with an immensely complicated, highly sensitive *sh’eilah* regarding *yichus* and a man’s ability to remarry his ex-wife six years after divorcing her,” he says. “I

was in an absolute state! I asked the petitioner to return the next day so I could think about the matter.”

Picking up the phone, Dayan Lichtenstein called the person most likely to be of assistance — his father.

Responding to his son, Reb Kalman in turn recalled his first *sh'eilah* when serving as *rav* in Rasein. It too was a difficult case, surrounding the identification of a *meis* and a potential *agunah*.

“I didn’t have a telephone to call for assistance,” explained the older *rav*. “So I had no choice but to take out my *Shulchan Aruch*. Have a good day!” and with that Rabbi Lichtenstein Sr. hung up the phone.

“It was my father’s first lesson to me in *rabbanus*.”

Over the past 26 years, Dayan Lichtenstein has focused his *dayanus* on three main areas — *kashrus* and *shechitah*, the *beis din*, and the *chevra kaddisha*.

“There were many practices in terms of *kashrus* and *shechitah* that needed to be tightened up considerably when I came to London,” he explains. “The cornerstone of my thinking on this has been that *kashrus* should be accessible to everybody.”

Dayan Lichtenstein himself is a member of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators and an accredited mediator, which means that *beis din* awards are upheld by the civil courts.

The synergy between the Federation *beis din* and the British justice system is highly positive and the Federation’s awards have been publicly praised twice in the English Court of Appeal.

“The key is that justice must be seen to be done,” says Sydney Fulda, a litigation partner at international law firm DAC Beachcroft LLP. “And for that, the *beis din* must be recognized as a respectable and respected institution — and indeed the Federation has an excellent record.”

Saving Agunos Perhaps the area for which Dayan Lichtenstein is best known is his work with *agunos*, having spared no efforts to release “chained women” from marriages that have sometimes kept them entrapped for decades. Over the years he estimates that he has personally been in-

involved in over 60 cases, about a third being exceptionally entrenched and complicated.

“I’ve discovered that it’s the personal touch that makes the difference,” he explains. “I’ve been involved in cases that were deemed to be absolutely intractable — there was one a few years ago where the husband and wife, both British, were living in Eretz Yisrael when they parted. The husband had been refusing a *get* for 14 years and he’d spent seven of those years in jail in Israel — two of them in solitary confinement!”

Within a month of talking to the man, allowing him to get all his anger and frustration out of his system, the woman had her *get* in hand.

“The key is getting the man to see things from the other side’s perspective, to understand that there is no advantage to him in trying to punish people. If you can get him to do this, his fury lessens. But it takes time and you have to sit and try to truly get to the root of what’s bothering him.”

It is clear why Dayan Lichtenstein feels so compelled to assist in these cases, traveling the length and breadth of the globe with a full *beis din* in tow if necessary. He cares about every single individual and will do all he can to alleviate suffering in the community.

Anti-Semitism on the Rise Over the course of 26 years, the changes that Dayan Lichtenstein has seen originating within the London community where he lives have been many and positive. The winds of change surrounding the community have also been blowing, however, and not always for the good.

“Anti-Semitism has become a problem over the last few years, it can’t be denied,” he states. “Every Shabbos I walk from my home in Golders Green to give a *shiur* a mile down the road in Hendon, and every Shabbos without fail some hooligan or other yells anti-Semitic expletives at me from a car window. Ten years ago, that just didn’t happen.”

Even more significantly, anti-Semitic and anti-Israel feeling has started to erode some of the Jewish institutions in the UK that have been taken for granted for decades. While the Dayan does not feel that the situation has

deteriorated to anywhere near the point that it has in Europe — “Our lives are not really under threat right now” — he does feel that action needs to be taken.

“*Shechitah* in this country is under intense scrutiny and pressure,” he states flatly. “The barrage from all sides is incessant — on the abattoirs, on the politicians. The situation is extremely precarious. And once they’re done with *shechitah*, I’m afraid *bris milah* will be next on the agenda. It’s definitely fair to state that the position and standing of Jews in the UK is not what it once was.

“We need to take responsibility for ourselves and not rely so much on the government, particularly when it comes to ensuring the safety of our communities and our property.”

The Measure of Success Regardless of whatever the Jews of London may be facing from elements outside their control, as the Dayan approaches the end of his third decade in the UK, he does not rest on his laurels when it comes to raising the standard of Yiddishkeit in London. His next goal is to encourage the establishment of more *kollelim* in this city of 170,000 Jews.

“A *kollel* is the measure of success of any Jewish community. In a city the size of London, to ensure the constant growth of Torah, you need several. To be sure, London has some extremely fine *kollelim* but the community is under-serviced by them in terms of its size. I have seven married children *kein ayin hara* and not one of them lives in London,” he says. “Why? There simply aren’t enough *kollelim*.”

Dayan Lichtenstein is cognizant of the size of the challenge he has set himself and his organization and anticipates that he may face detractors. But given the changes he has overseen in London since 1989, it has hard to believe that opposition to his plans will be as loud or as strident as they may once have been.

By his own admission, the level of apathy and inertia he found in his constituency upon his arrival in town has largely dissipated. The Federation under Dayan Lichtenstein’s care has flourished and become a veritable force for Orthodoxy in London and across the UK. ●